

Understanding the Meaning of Wayang Kulit Performance using Thick Description Approach

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Abstract: This paper described the meaning of *Wayang Kulit* in Javanese philosophy, a brief description of the figures represented by the puppets. *Wayang* is one of the cultural heritages of Java which is very deep understanding of the culture and character of the people of Indonesia. The meaning of symbols of wayang is the focus of this paper. The symbols are represented by character of Semar, Bagong, Petruk and Gareng. What is the role wayang in daily life, especially for Indonesian people, is becoming the main discussion as well. There are a lot of wayang performances that have a deep meaning of the life itself. Although there are some scholars who say that *wayang* is originally from India but it is not proved and, in the end, people accepted that *wayang* came from Java. Opinion about *wayang* originated from India was because the story in the puppet was adapted from the *Mahabharata* story originating from India. Using the concept of thick description by Clifford Geertz, the author tries to explain about the history and character of the puppet figures according to Javanese philosophy. Prominent figures such as Semar, Gareng, Petruk and Bagong were the reflection of the ideal human being depicted with an imperfect physical form. From the 4 characters, the author tried to give a picture of the meaning that there are symbolization in *Wayang Kulit* and the meaning of the characters. Apart from the character of the *Panakawan*, the author discussed about *Pandawa*, *Kurawa* and *Payon*. Some of the *Wayang Kulit* performances, in Indonesia, have specific purposes. Such as, describing politics, education and culture. The interpretation sometimes is not as simple as it seen. The understanding of one is very much dependent on the understanding of *wayang* itself. Therefore, this paper is to give more knowledge of audience so that they can understand the deep meaning of the performance.

1 INTRODUCTION

Indonesia has a variety of cultures that gave birth to various kinds of art. To explore the art in Indonesia even more challenging, since the existing art of Indonesia was influenced by various factors, such as religion, environment, and geographical conditions.

In anthropology, or anyway social anthropology, what the practitioners do is ethnography. And it is in understanding what ethnography is, or more exactly what doing ethnography is, that a start can be made toward grasping what anthropological analysis amounts to as a form of knowledge (Martin & McIntyre, 1994). This, it must immediately be said, is not a matter of methods. From one point of view, that of the textbook, doing ethnography is establishing

rapport, selecting informants, transcribing texts, taking genealogies, mapping fields, keeping a diary, and so on. But it is not these things, techniques and received procedures that define the enterprise.

Java Island itself has a variety of different cultures, although there are some similarities but often have different meanings. One of the only arts that we can find in Java Island is wayang. There are various types of puppets, namely, Wayang Orang, Wayang Kulit and Wayang Golek. These types of puppets come from different regions. Wayang Golek comes from West Java and made of wood. Wayang Orang is from Central Java, played by a man, while Wayang Kulit is made from buffalo or cow skin. Originating from Javanese family, the authors were interested in the art of wayang culture from Eastern

Java. The author tried to explain the wayang art with the thick description approach by Clifford Geertz, who suggested on interpreting to the deeper culture of the symbols.

Like the Javanese wayang theatre, from which it takes its name, the WAYANG model is not meant to be an exact description of reality. It is a simplification which nevertheless brings to our attention relationships of interest and importance for real-world affairs and which is thereby capable of enhancing our capacity to understand the world and to act well within it (Wittwer, 1999).

This paper is focusing on the meaning of symbols of wayang which represented by characters, such as Semar, Bagong, Petruk and Gareng. Role of wayang in daily life, especially for Indonesian people was also emphasized in the discussion below.

2 LITERATURE STUDIES

2.1 “Thick Description” as Context and Meaning

As emphasized by all the authors heretofore referenced in this Brief Note, a central component of “thick description” is the interpretation of what is being observed or witnessed. Denzin has made a major contribution to qualitative research by carefully showing the sequential link of “thick description” to “thick interpretation” (Denzin, 1989). It is the qualitative researcher’s task to thickly describe social action, so that thick interpretations of the actions can be made, presented in written form, and made available to a wide audience of readers. Without “thick description,” “thick interpretation” is not possible. Without “thick interpretation,” written reports of research will lack credibility and resonance with the research community, the research participants themselves, and with the wider audience of readers for whom the report is intended (Ponterotto & Grieger, 2007). It is the thick interpretive work of researchers that brings readers to an understanding of the social actions being reported upon.

2.2 The Essence of “Thick Description”

In integrating the work of Ryle (2009), Denzin (1989), Holloway (1997), and Schwandt (2001), one can extract the following essential components of “thick description.” 1. “Thick description” involves accurately describing and interpreting social actions within the appropriate context in which the social action took place. 2. “Thick description” captures the

thoughts, emotions, and web of social interaction among observed participants in their operating context. 3. A central feature to interpreting social actions entails assigning motivations and intentions for the said social actions. 4. The context for, and the specifics of, the social action are so well described that the reader experiences a sense of verisimilitude as they read the researcher’s account. 5. “Thick description” of social actions promotes “thick interpretation” of these actions, which lead to “thick meaning” of the findings that resonate with readers (Ponterotto & Grieger, 2007). I like to use the metaphor of a tree to explain the interconnection of these three concepts. The “thick description” constitutes the roots of the tree that nourish and feed “thick interpretation,” represented by the solid trunk of the tree, which in turn feeds the branches and leaves of the tree, which represent the “thick meaning.” It is the branches and leaves that most capture the viewers’ attention, as is the case with “thick meaning,” which grasps the attention of the reader of the study. Thick description captures the thoughts and feelings of participants as well as the often complex web of relationships among them. Thick description leads to thick interpretation, which in turns leads to thick meaning of the research findings for the researchers and participants themselves, and for the report’s intended readership. Thick meaning of findings leads readers to a sense of verisimilitude, wherein they can cognitively and emotively “place” themselves within the research context.

Cultural historian, Dr. GAJ. Hazeau believes that wayang comes from Indonesia, especially Java. Understanding the wayang in the dissertation Dr. Hazeau was an ornament that was carved and seen in the shadow of the shadow. In addition to Hazeau, there were some researchers from west and Europe who had different opinions about the origin of puppets. Western researchers said that wayang was originated from Indonesia, especially East Java, because wayang art is closely related to the socio-cultural and religious situation of Indonesia

The wayang culture is considered coming from Indonesia during the heyday of the kingdom in East Java, namely Kahuripan, which was then led by King Airlangga (976-1012). At that time the puppets used as entertainment and literary texts used in the story was the Book of Ramayana Kakawin, which was written in ancient Javanese language during the reign of King Dyah Balitung (989-910). The manuscript was a compilation of the Book of Ramayana by Walmiki, a poet that came from India.

The early period of the 10th century was called the period of globalization for wayang because of the shift of public confidence from animism to Hinduism. Therefore the figures and the placement of the deity were in line to Hindu teachings. In the 12th century until the 15th century was a period of secularization where the story in wayang always glorified the kings and introduced the king as the direct descendant of the gods. In the 15th century, the story in wayang turned into history and Islamic philosophy. But in the 16th century, during the kingdom of Demak, the rules of the story in the puppets were changed because Raden Patah considered too many things in the puppets that are incompatible with Islam.

2.3 Panakawan

In the puppet story, there were 4 very famous figures namely Gareng, Petruk, Bagong, and Semar. They were often referred to as *Panakawan* or *Punakawan*. They symbolize the common people. The character indicated a variety of roles, such as knight advisers, entertainers, social critics, clowns and even the source of truth and policy. These four *Panakawan* were the symbol of creation, taste, intention and work.

Semar had a prominent characteristic of white *kuncung* as a symbol of the mind, a clear mind or idea. Semar was the nanny of Pendawa. He was also believed to be Hyang Ismaya who had supernatural powers beyond the gods. Gareng had a prominent feature of cross-eyed, arms and legged limp. The three physical defects symbolized the taste. Crossed eyes, was a sense of alertness, arched hands was a sense of thoroughness and a limping leg was a sense of caution. Gareng was Semar's son, which meant idol or obtained by worship. Nalagareng was a man who could not speak very well, what he said sometimes went awry. But he was very funny and ridiculous. He was very powerful and could only be defeated by Petruk. Petruk was a symbol of will, desire, intention depicted in both hands. If moved, both hands were like two people who work well together. The front hand points, chooses what was desired, the back hand holds tightly to what had been chosen. Semar's sweet-faced boy with an attractive smile, panda talk, and also very funny. He liked to quip into untruth with his jokes. It was said that he ran *ajimat Kalimasada*. Nothing could beat him apart from Gareng. While the works symbolized Bagong with two fingers and fifth hand wide open, meaning that he always willing to work hard. Bagong meant Semar's shadow. Bagong had a sassy and stupid attitude. He is also very funny.

Pandawas Bima or Bimasena was a protagonist in the epic story of Mahabharata. He was regarded as a heroic figure. He was the son of Kunti and known as a powerful *Pandawas*, always rude and frightening to the enemy, although in fact his heart was gentle. He was a family of *Pandawas* in the second sequence, of five brothers. His brother Se'ayah was the famous female epic of the Ramayana and often called Hanoman. The end of Bima's story was told that he died perfectly (*moksa*) with his four brothers after the end of the Bharatayuddha war. The story was narrated in episodes of Prasthanikaparwa. Bima loyal to one attitude, that was not like stale and never to be ambiguous and never lick his own saliva. Gatotkaca was known as the son of Bimasena or Wrekodara of the *Pandawas*. His mother named Hidimbi (Harimbi) came from a greedy nation, he was told to have extraordinary powers. In the great war in Kurukshetra he killed many of the Korawa allies before finally falling on Karna's hands. In Indonesia, Gatotkaca became a very popular puppet character. For example, in Javanese *wayang* he is known as the Gatutkaca spelling (Javanese: Gathutkaca). Supernatural powers are told extraordinarily, among others, capable of flying in the sky without wings, and famous with the nickname "muscle wire bone iron". Yudhisthira aka Dharmawangsa, was a king who ruled the kingdom of Kuru, with the central government in Hastinapura. He was the oldest of the five *Pandawas*, or the sons of Pandu. In the puppet tradition, Yudhisthira was given the title "Prabu" and had the nickname Puntadewa, while his kingdom was called by the name of the Kingdom of Amarta.

Among Korawa, the prominent were Duryodana and Dursasana, antagonists in the Mahabharata, and they were all killed in battle against their cousin, the *Pandawas*, in Kurukshetra. Although the sons of Gandari were referred to as evil figures, the high moral teachings in the Mahabharata refer to Gandari. He repeatedly counselled his son to follow the dharma and make peace with the *Pandawas*. Gandari was close to Kunti who respected him like an elder brother. In the *Wayang Kulit* performance, there is always *kayon* or also called mountains (*gunungan*). According to Drs. R. Soetarno AK, *gunungan* was a shadow puppet and its contents. Underneath was a picture of a gate guarded by two giants holding swords and shields. It symbolized the palace gate, and at times the *gunungan* was used as a palace. At the top of the mountain there was a wooden tree surrounded by a dragon.

In the mountains there were also pictures of various forest animals. The picture as a whole described the situation in the wilderness. *Gunungan*

symbolized the state of the world and its contents. Before the *wayang* was played, the *Gunungan* was plugged in the middle of the screen, leaning slightly to the right which meant that the *wayang* performance had not started yet, like the uncharted world. Once played, the *Gunungan* was revoked, lined up on the right. *Gunungan* was also used as a sign of the change of the play or story stages.

3 METHODOLOGY

This research was conducted in the period of 6 (six) months, using the method of literature study. The research based on the previous researches, which have been done by Indonesian people or others. The validity of the research has been measured by the similarity of the results from the literatures. This method was chosen since one of the authors was wayang lover and has been observing wayang for more than 15 years.

4 DISCUSSION

4.1 The Symbolization of Characters in Wayang

Thick Description suggested by Clifford Geertz is a thick exposition by participating in the lives of cultural actors, so as to recognize symbolic meanings as defined by the actors *themselves*. Geertz in understanding the hidden meanings in cultural symbols uses a set of tools known as approaches in the philosophy of science: hermeneutics, the sociology of knowledge, the ethics of meaning and structuralism.

Puppet in the community of Java is a life lesson that has a very high value. Puppet is no longer a fairy tale that is a spectacle. *Wayang* is not an entertainment but wayang has become identity and philosophy of life of society of java. Puppet is the result of creation, taste, of human initiative in the spiritual process. The story of the Gods, Pandawas, Kurawa, Panakawan and natural life were symbols that professes very deep meaning and contains a very high philosophical teachings. Unwittingly, the Javanese people often teach their children with the principles held by the figures in wayang. Each symbol contained in the wayang world has its own meaning and represents human nature. The form of human greed in puppetry is described by the Kurawa. They possessed the greedy nature of envy. Kurawa was an

antagonist in the world of wayang. Kurawa is told to be defeated in the war against the Pandawas. Pandawas were protagonists. Described as a man with a good face, had everything that makes them perfect, Pandawas is a good human image, while Panakawan is the ideal human image.

Panakawan had an imperfect physical form. They are portrayed as ugly beings but they have qualities that humans should possess. In Panakawan, Semar was the most respected because he was considered the wisest. This indicates that the wise man will always be respected, honoured and followed by others. Kurawa was described as a greedy, evil, and creepy giant. They fought against their cousins, Pandawas, just for the sake of power. This teaches us to always avoid all forms of enmity and always love each other for each other. The Pandawas, as a symbol of the knight, were described as handsome, clean and good-natured. Pandawas won the battle against Kurawa. Pandawas are a form of human dreams. Pandawas are a very difficult picture to accomplish. Pandawas was too perfect as a human being. Therefore, Pandawas are separated as half-gods.

Wayang evolved and developed rapidly in early 16th century with the rise of Sultan Demak and his patronage on the wayang. One of the results was that the wayang puppet figures became very stylized and no longer resembled the human face and reflected the change in philosophy and religion. By Sunan Kalijaga, the philosophy of Islam was found in the wayang performances (Indoindians, 2016).

As discussed above, that wayang implicitly contained philosophy and religious teachings, especially in Indonesia, where the Sunan spread Islam. In Java, wayang is used for the da'wah of Islam. It is growing rapidly, experiencing various transformations in the visual aspect, and other supporting aspects such as karawitan, literature, and so on. Wali Sanga himself is involved intensively here, especially Susuhunan Kalijaga and his son Susuhunan Panggung. They strive to collaborate between puppet arts that sound of non-Islam with the teachings of Islam. Thanks to their role, *wayang kulit* art by some parties interpreted Islamic teachings in every aspect (Koesoemadinata, 2016).

4.2 The Role of Wayang in Daily Life

The performance of wayang was also used as a metaphor of Indonesian Leaders. The trend to portray Indonesian presidents as Panakawan (clown servants) in wayang (shadow puppetry) was started under the former President Soeharto. Whereas Soeharto chose to be conveyed as Semar, a clown but

also a former god, greater artistic freedom post-Soeharto led to a more farcical depiction of Habibie and Gus Dur as Semar's sons, Gareng and Bagong (Pausacker, 2004).

Sigmund Freud (1856 - 1939) in his psychoanalysis stated that negatively a priori assumption would develop the negative attitude toward something (Willyarto, Chairiyani, & Pane, 2015) and Satria Dharma in his article "Apapun Kurikulumnya, Mutu Guru Kuncinya", showed that teacher's role is more important than the curriculum (Benawa, Gea, & Willyarto, 2017). For example, if a child thinks that learning is hard, then psychologically, the child's psyche will lock his ratio thinking. As a result, he is more likely to quit developing his way of thinking further, and eventually generates his inability in learning and in his daily problem solving skills. Therefore, it is necessary for teachers to improve their method of teaching. One way to vary the methods is by using wayang in learning process. Vygotsky's theory is widely applied in the education. Thoughts on the 'next growing area' (zone of proximal development), provide additional aspects in analyzing the verbal communication skills of students. The theory also gave implications on interpreting signs and symbols used (Willyarto, Werhoru, & Gea, 2017). The use of wayang in education is supporting the process of learning itself on interpreting on wayang performance.

Wayang adapts the story to the daily life of Indonesian people equipped with the history and culture of Indonesia. Indigenous figures that are always oppressed and discriminated in Indonesian, was brought to a puppet stories with a degree of nobility with inner beauty and a humble but wise, played by the figures Semar, Gareng and Petruk.

Summed up by Koesoemadinata (2016), Cirebon's shadow play is a reflection of cross-cultural diplomacy success in the past on a regional scale, and could be a projection of an alternative diplomacy success in the future on a global, even in universal scale. Puppet in Indonesian culture has been able to shed the limits of a rigid diplomacy to be softened because of its appearance in Cirebon in the past. Cirebon which is a harbor city became a meeting area of various countries such as China, Arab, India, France and other European countries. This inter-state interaction becomes harmonious as told in previous research (Yunus, 2017).

5 CONCLUSION

Wayang can be used in all aspects of human life, such as education, politics, religion, culture and entertainment. In the puppet story, there are four very famous figures namely Gareng, Petruk, Bagong, and Semar. They symbolize the common people. Each character indicates a variety of roles, such as knight advisers, entertainers, social critics, clowns and even the source of truth and policy. Other figure is Gatotkaca, a very popular character. He has supernatural powers are told extraordinarily, among others, capable of flying in the sky without wings, and famous with the nickname "muscle wire bone iron".

Puppet in the community of Javanese people is a life lesson that has a very deep value. Puppet is no longer a fairy tale as it shown. Wayang has become identity and philosophy of life of society of Javanese culture. The wayang world is a picture of human life in the real world. The philosophy of Islam was also found in the wayang performances. There is a cross-cultural diplomacy strategy that must be acknowledged, understood, and practiced in wayang performance. The reflection of a successful diplomacy of the past can potentially be applied in the present and harmonic relationships can emerge from cultural diversity into the midst of rapid globalization.

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